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ABSTRACT

A study examined the way teachers have been portrayed in nine films spanning a 50-year time period. Thirty-seven teachers attending a graduate education course completed a 27-item questionnaire to rate each of nine films. Results indicated that although the teachers portrayed in the films were distinctly different from each other, overall, the teachers were portrayed as earnest and dedicated, but poorly trained, inept, rebellious, and dull. Findings suggest that viewers would neither emulate these teachers nor be inspired by them to become teachers. (RS)

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THE IMAGE OF THE TEACHER IN FILM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the way teachers are portrayed in 9 films spanning a 50 year time period. It was hypothesized that the films would portray teachers negatively, in an undifferentiated and stereotypic manner that is not true to the real life models known to viewers. Teachers rated the behavior of the heroes in these films. Contrary to expectations, heroes were distinctly different. However, the overall portrayal was negative. Teachers were portrayed as earnest and dedicated, but poorly trained, inept, rebellious and dull. Viewers would neither emulate them nor be inspired by them to become teachers.

THE IMAGE OF THE TEACHER IN FILM

Students of media have argued about whether television and film ought to portray characters as they realistically are or in a more symbolic form. Gerbner (1973) for example argues that if fictional characters on television were true to life they would falsify the deeper truth of cultural values served by their symbolic function. But DeFleur (1964) thinks that the portrayal ought to be true to life and has noted that "Television presents least often and as least desirable those occupations in which its younger viewers are most likely to find themselves later".

One of the occupations that has been depicted in a great number of television programs and films is the occupation of teaching. This paper examines the way teachers are portrayed in 9 films spanning a 50 year time period. It was hypothesized that the films would portray teachers negatively, in an undifferentiated and stereotypic manner that is not true to the real life models known to viewers.

METHOD

Twenty in-service teachers enrolled in a graduate education course described the characteristics of a good teacher. From a preliminary list, a set of items consisting of characteristics which the entire group considered important, was selected.

Based on the pilot testing, a new questionnaire consisting of 27 bipolar 7 point scales was constructed. Items tapped pedagogical issues (eg. training and knowledge), didactic issues (eg. ability to motivate students, disciplinary climate established by the teacher), and personality characteristics (eg. how energetic, creative, or humorous the teacher is). In addition, four Yes/No questions were asked:

1. Would you have liked to have a teacher like this? **HAVE TEACHER**
2. Would you like to be like this teacher? **BE LiKE**
3. Would this film have influenced you to become a teacher? **BECOME TEACHER**
4. Did you ever know a teacher like this? **KNOW**

37 teachers attending a graduate education course used the questionnaire to rate each of the following 9 films:

1. Goodbye Mr. Chips **(CHIPS)**
2. The Corn is Green **(CORN)**
3. Blackboard Jungle **(JUNGLE)**
4. To Sir With Love **(SIR)**
5. Conrack **(CONRACK)**
6. The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie **(JEAN)**
7. Stand and Deliver **(STAND)**
8. Dead Poets Society **(POET)**
9. Up the Down Staircase **(STAIRCASE)**

RESULTS

One way analyses of variance, using each of the films as independent variables were conducted. Duncan range tests were used to determine which films differed significantly from others.

Each of the 27 bipolar scales significantly ($p < .0001$) differentiated between the teachers portrayed in these films. Because of space limitations, only some of the highlights can be mentioned. Mean ratings are shown in parentheses. Overall, teachers were seen as only moderately well trained (4.3). But there was great variation, with **POET** best trained (6.3) and **CONRACK** worst (2.4). Likewise, teachers were considered socially inept: they related only moderately well to peers (4.3). **SIR** was most socially skilled (5.5) and **JEAN** was least (3.2). Teachers were quite counterdependent - scoring 4.0 in their ability to relate to authority. **CONRACK** was most rebellious and **SIR** most compliant. Overall, they did not have a great sense of humor (4.8). However, there was great variation ranging from the extremely funny **POET** (6.7) and **CONRACK** (6.4) to the dull **JEAN** (3.7) and the deadly boring **CORN** (2.6). Also extreme was the variation in creativity: **POET** (6.9), **CONRACK** (6.6), and **STAND** (6.5) were extremely creative compared with uncreative **CHIPS** (2.8) and **CORN** (2.3). On the positive side, all teachers liked kids (6.1) and were motivated to remain in their profession (6.2).

The four other questions are of interest. For the **HAVE TEACHER** question, viewers would have wanted all teachers except **JEAN** and **CORN**. More interesting was **BE LIKE**. Fewer than ⅓ wanted to be like **CORN, JEAN,** or **STAIRCASE**. The most desirable role models were **POET, STAND,** and **SIR** (respectively). For the third question, **BECOME TEACHER**, only two films would have influenced a majority of viewers to become teachers: **STAND** (72%) and **POET** (53%). Finally, perhaps the depiction of these teachers was unrealistic because with the exception of **STAIRCASE** (56%), the majority of viewers never knew a teacher like any of those depicted.

DISCUSSION

Teacher films can be considered a genre and rated using the scale developed in this study. As predicted, the image portrayed is not true to life. Also as predicted, teachers are portrayed negatively. Contrary to prediction, the teachers have unique images in each film. Viewers would have wanted to have most of these teachers, who are, as a collectivity, portrayed as earnest and dedicated, loving children, but poorly trained, inept, rebellious, and dull. On the whole, viewers would not emulate them as role models. This genre of teacher films will probably not inspire youngsters to become teachers.

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